



Mexican Drug Trafficking and Cartel Operations amid COVID-19

November 19, 2020

Mexico is a primary foreign producer and transit country for illicit drugs [destined](#) for the United States. Policymakers, including many in Congress, have been closely watching how the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has affected drug flow patterns out of Mexico, including the flow of potent opioids and other illicit drugs. Any changes could affect the extent to which Mexico-based transnational criminal organizations, popularly described as *cartels*, pose a threat to U.S. national security. To date, U.S.-bound illicit drug supplies have persisted, despite early supply chain disruptions.

Illicit Drug Flows

According to various press, [think-tank](#), U.S. government, and [United Nations](#) reports, the pandemic's effect thus far on Mexico-based drug production and trafficking has been mixed. COVID-19-related lockdowns and slowdowns in container trade and port activity, particularly in China and India, appear to have caused [shortages](#) in precursor chemicals used to synthesize methamphetamine and fentanyl, resulting in temporary [product shortages](#) and [price increases](#). Some reports indicate that Mexican traffickers have [stockpiled](#) resources, including cash, due to the uncertainty of how COVID-19 would affect law enforcement attention on the illicit drug trade. [Several high-profile seizures](#) in 2020 point to potential trafficker miscalculations as cartels adapt to the COVID-19 operating environment. Such seizures, however, also indicate that illicit drugs and money continue to flow along U.S.-Mexico trafficking corridors. Mexican opium poppy cultivation and heroin production, for example, have been [largely unaffected](#) by COVID-19-related developments. The pandemic may [motivate](#) Mexico-based drug producers to find alternative precursor sources and further develop domestic production capabilities.

Such reports are consistent with early [predictions](#) that global mobility restrictions and trade declines associated with the pandemic could disrupt illicit drug supply chains and diversify drug trafficking patterns and routes but that any disruptions to Mexican production and trafficking likely would be temporary. In October 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [assessed](#) that the pandemic “has slowed the pace of drug trafficking into the United States” and disrupted some cartel operations but that cartels’ ability to move large quantities of drugs remains “largely intact.”

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11535

Cartel Operations

The pandemic does not appear to have diminished the extensive criminal and political power of Mexico's organized crime groups. In September, President Trump [exhorted](#) the Mexican government to do more to contain the cartels, which he described as posing "a clear threat to Mexico and the Mexican government's ability to exert effective control over parts of its country." DHS also [considers](#) Mexican cartels a key threat to the U.S. homeland because of their ability to control territory and trafficking routes along the U.S. Southwest Border and to co-opt officials at various levels of government.

Neither the prospect of infection nor government-mandated mobility restrictions during the pandemic appear to have significantly deterred cartel activity. The range of criminality by smaller cartels has broadened or diversified under COVID-19 lockdown pressure, while fragmentation of some cartels has continued. The current conditions seem to have fostered intensified inter-cartel competition, favoring the territorial ambitions of larger Mexican [cartels](#). As a result, crimes of assault and homicide [remained elevated](#) to high levels during Mexico's response to the pandemic, even as crimes of opportunity, such as kidnapping and [robbery](#), appear to have declined temporarily.

Mexico's homicide rate remains "[stuck](#)" at historically high levels and is anticipated to set another record by the end of 2020. In 2019 and thus far in 2020, the most homicides in Mexico have been reported in the central state of [Guanajuato](#) and the border state of Baja California, where rival groups [jockey](#) for drug routes, extortion rackets, and control of other illicit markets. Organized crime-related violence also has encroached into the Mexican capital. At one point in April, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador seemed to underscore the reality of uncontrolled criminality in his morning newscast by [petitioning](#) the drug traffickers directly to lower their violence.

Angling for the Pandemic Advantage

Some analysts have warned that the cartels would try to [exploit](#) the pandemic for [profit and territorial gain](#). Press interviews with cartel-aligned traffickers describe [directives](#) to increase drug prices. Some observers [speculated](#) that cartels used the pandemic as pretext to collude and behave as price-setting cartels. Mexican crime groups reportedly [distributed](#) aid packages to the local populace, branded with cartel insignia, and [enforced](#) COVID-19-related [lockdown measures](#). Such activities, amplified on social media, appear to be intended to win the hearts and minds of local communities to support their criminal enterprises and attract recruits. The handouts reinforce the perception of a weak Mexican government, amid a [forecast](#) economic contraction of more than 9% in 2020, unable to exert territorial control. Some observers also posit that the pandemic has motivated cartels to diversify and expand their use of [submersible craft](#), [drones](#), ultralights, [tunnels](#), and cryptocurrencies.

U.S. Policy Outlook

As Congress considers the pandemic's effect on Mexican drug flows and cartel activity, the future of U.S.-Mexico collaboration on drug matters remains a concern for many. In September, Attorney General William Barr [acknowledged](#) that the pandemic disrupted bilateral efforts to combat cartels and expressed his hope to "get back on track with Mexico." Congressional focus may center on whether Mexico can devote sufficient resources for engagement on joint counternarcotics priorities during a pandemic-induced recession. A key question is how the [Mérida Initiative](#), a joint security and governance partnership supported by U.S. foreign aid to Mexico, can continue to strengthen bilateral efforts to target transnational crime. Observers also are watching closely for further consequences resulting from the surprise U.S. arrest in October of former Mexican Secretary of Defense Salvador Cienfuegos on drug and money-laundering [charges](#). Responding to Mexican [pressure](#), the United States agreed in [November](#) to drop the case and release Cienfuegos. Although the gambit may sustain bilateral relations in the near term,

memory of the Cienfuegos case could affect U.S. credibility as a trusted partner in major drug-related investigations when COVID-19 abates.

For more on Mexico's criminal environment, see CRS Report R41576, *Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations*.

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